CAMPAIGN 2012

Virginia: A study in swing

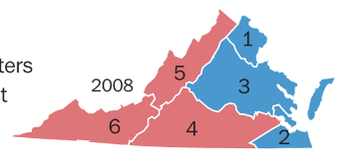
In 2008, Barack Obama won eight states that voted for President George W. Bush in 2004. In six of those, including Virginia, more voters turned out in 2008 than in 2004 — and the Democratic gain closely followed the increase in the total number of voters. **By Ted Mellnik and Laura Stanton**

Virginia saw voter turnout jump in 2008 . . .

These six states accounted for more than 2 million of the 5 million additional voters in 2008. Overall, half a million more Virginians voted in 2008 than in 2004.

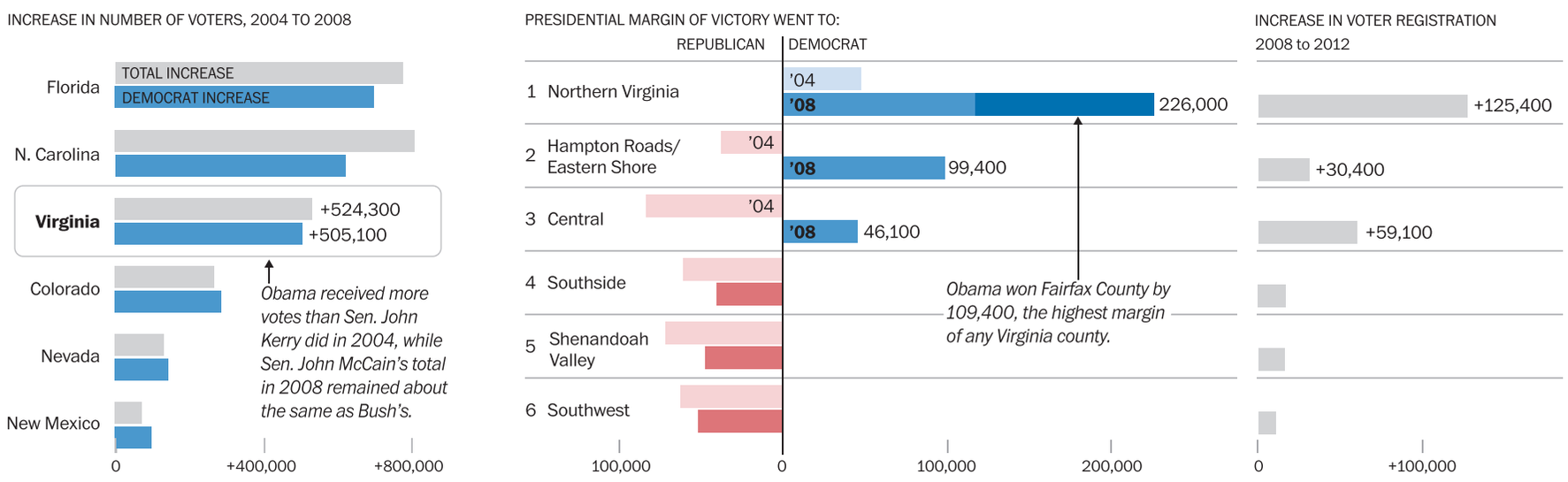
. . . in three regions . . .

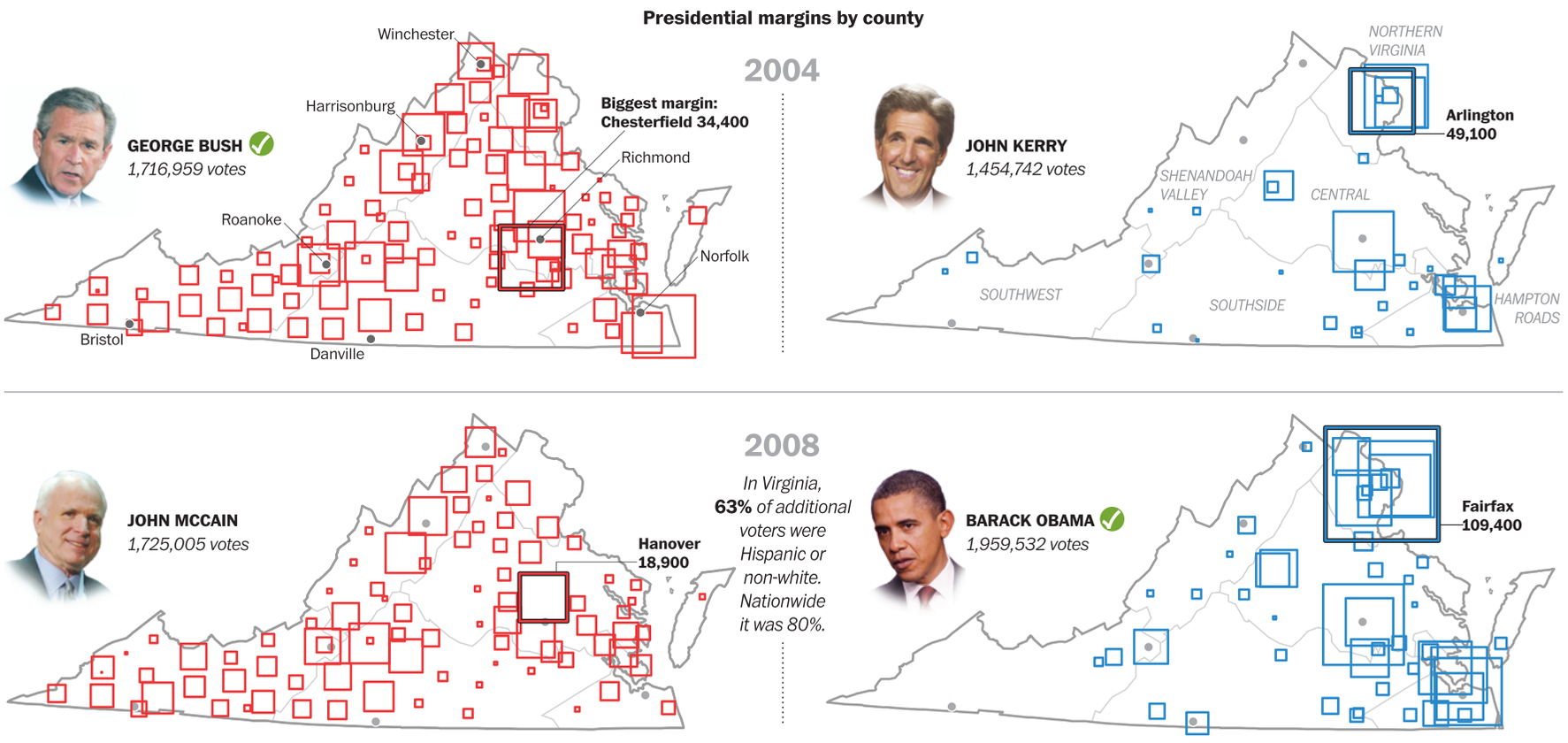
The bulk of the additional 2008 Virginia voters were in the three regions that had the most votes shift in Obama's favor.



. . . that could hold the key to 2012

Those regions also have had the largest increase in voter registration in 2012.





NOTE: In Iowa and Ohio, the two other swing battleground states, the 2008 gain for Democrats mirrored a decrease in Republican votes for president.
Sources: U.S. Census Bureau; Virginia State Board of Elections; election authorities in Florida, North Carolina, Colorado, Nevada and New Mexico; National Atlas of the United States

THE WASHINGTON POST

Obama's chance to connect on the debate stage

Supporters and advisers hope town-hall format allows candidate to click with voters

BY AMY GARDNER

Backstage at an Ohio rally in Columbus this summer, Michelle Obama skipped into the room to meet supporters who had earned the privilege of having dinner with her husband. President Obama followed, and when one of his guests offered an outstretched hand, Obama returned a bear-hug. "We don't do handshakes in our family," he said. "We do hugs."

The Obamas talked about their daughters' piano lessons, their struggles with student loan payments, the grind of the campaign trail. Michelle Obama grasped the hands of her guests as she spoke. Later, the guests said they felt at ease, that President Obama and his wife were regular people.

The Obama campaign fervently hopes that the president will make a similar impression when he takes the debate stage Tuesday. Supporters and advisers see an opportunity in the town-hall format for him to connect directly with his questioners.

In the first debate, in Denver, Obama appeared sluggish and gave rambling responses. The performance surprised supporters and critics alike. Now, Americans are looking to see whether he can do better. Supporters who have met him are especially puzzled.

"When I turned off my television, I started crying," said Paulette Camp, who owns a country store with her husband in western North Carolina and met Obama backstage in Columbus. "I thought, 'Oh, my God — we just lost this election.' I couldn't believe it. I don't know who that person was."

She was among the winners of one of the Obama campaign contests, which include "Dinner with Barack," "Backstage with Barack," "NYC with Barack, Jay-Z and Beyonce."

Obama's contests encourage supporters to give money and share valuable information about themselves with the campaign. They offer camera-ready portraits of a campaign in which even a volunteer has a chance to meet the president.

Perhaps most important, though, the contests can showcase Obama's ability to connect with ordinary Americans on their terms, something he did not do well in Denver.

Presidential debate

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Get a curated look at the best of the social media conversation and add your own responses to what the candidates are saying in real time on The Grid, our home for live coverage.

Glenn Kessler will fact-check the candidates' answers live on the Election 2012 blog.

- **Get instant analysis**
The Fix will pick winners and losers immediately after the debate. Visit Wednesday for Say What, our interactive transcript experience, to replay the debate matched with social sentiment.

NIKKI KAHN/THE WASHINGTON POST

A boy smiles at President Obama at Ohio State University in Columbus last week. Backers who have met the president at small campaign events say they felt at ease talking to him.

"We heard you just graduated!" Obama said to Grace Litano of Miami when she met him at the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte. "We definitely need more public health officials, so what you're doing is awesome."

Litano is a single mom, a native of Peru and a hospital case manager who recently completed her master's degree in public health. She won a contest to attend the convention and meet the president by donating $10 to the campaign. Standing in line at Obama's hotel near Charlotte with other contest winners, Litano knew that Obama had studied her biography and that this is what politicians do, but she was impressed anyway.

"He's so easygoing, you just forget that he's president," Litano said, recalling that Obama told jokes but also asked after her 6-year-old daughter, Katelyn, and talked about his support for the Dream Act.

The story is similar for other winners who have spent five, seven, 11 minutes with the president. Granted, they are all donors and volunteers who will vote for Obama, but they were downright giddy, and surprised at how down-to-earth they found him to be.

"We all had similar stories to tell," recalled David Garcia, a music professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who won a "Dinner with Barack" contest and dined with his wife, two other couples and the Obamas in Washington last week. The president had a cheeseburger, and the first lady shared her fries with the table, Garcia said.

"They were talking about their daughters," Garcia recalled. "It was real and it was genuine."

Obama has held 17 such contests since last October, giving more than 70 supporters from across the country the chance to have dinner, attend a Los Angeles fundraiser with George Clooney or watch the president shoot hoops in New York with basketball stars.

The connections made in these settings may be explained by the fact that these are people who are already supporters. And it also may be that the winners are chosen for their helpfulness to the campaign. Most are from swing states. More than a few are teachers. Others are students, small-business owners or government workers whose stories resonate with the president's message. Inevitably, they all have a lot to talk about.

"He asked us everything about our lives — where went to school, where we lived, our neighbors, our businesses, our customers," recalled Camp, the store owner from North Carolina. "He was so interested in our lives, like when you just meet someone where you just clicked. He's really good with people, and this town hall will be people. So I think that part of him is going to really shine."

gardnera@washpost.com

The Fix

Political news and analysis from the Fix team

Early voting favors Democrats

Early voting has edged past the 1 million mark, and although the numbers are still too few to draw broad conclusions, they show a Democratic advantage.

"Registered Democrats are voting at levels that are either equal to or exceeding the 2008 elections as a percentage of votes cast so far," said political science professor Michael McDonald, who heads the United States Elections Project at George Mason University, which monitors data.

In Iowa, the state with the largest share of the electorate voting early, Democrats have a nearly 2-to-1 edge (52 percent to 28 percent) among the 220,000 early votes cast. The margin is narrower when it comes to absentee ballot requests (48 to 30) and Republicans have gained ground there in recent weeks.

In Florida, Republicans have a four-point margin in party registration of early voters (44 to 40), but that is down considerably over their 12-point edge in 2008.

Ohio, the all-important battleground state, is harder to read because partisan registration is not reported. County numbers show increased early voting in heavy Democratic and Republican areas. In Franklin County, home to Ohio State University, where President Obama's campaign has pushed hard to organize students, 11 percent of the electorate has voted early.

McDonald said that overall early voting in the United States is likely to exceed 2008 levels, when about 30 percent of the electorate cast ballots before Election Day.

"The unknown question here is whether the Obama campaign is simply harvesting votes they would have gotten anyway or are actually activating people who would not have otherwise voted. It's probably a combination of the two," McDonald said.

Mitt Romney's campaign said Monday that with just 5 percent of the expected early vote in hand, it was too soon to assess who holds the advantage. In a statement, Romney political director Rich Beeson called the conclusions "almost as absurd as predicting the outcome of a baseball game after the second out."

— Bill Turque and Aaron Blake

Election 2012

The guide to campaign news

Steamed over soup kitchen visit

The head of a northeast Ohio charity says the Romney campaign "ramrodded their way" into the group's Youngstown soup kitchen last week so that Republican vice-presidential candidate Paul Ryan could get his picture taken washing dishes there.

Brian J. Antal, president of the Mahoning County St. Vincent De Paul Society, said he was not contacted by the Romney campaign ahead of the Saturday morning visit by Ryan, who stopped by the soup kitchen after a town hall at Youngstown State University.

"We're a faith-based organization; we are apolitical because the majority of our funding is from private donations," Antal said in a phone interview Monday. "It's strictly in our bylaws not to do it. They showed up there, and they did not have permission. They got one of the volunteers to open up the doors." He added: "The photo-op they did wasn't even accurate. He did nothing. He just came in here to get his picture taken at the dining hall."

Ryan stopped by the soup kitchen for about 15 minutes on his way to the airport after his town hall. By the time he arrived, the food had already been served, the patrons had left and the hall had been cleaned. A Romney aide said the campaign spoke with a woman in charge on-site but did not contact Antal ahead of the visit.

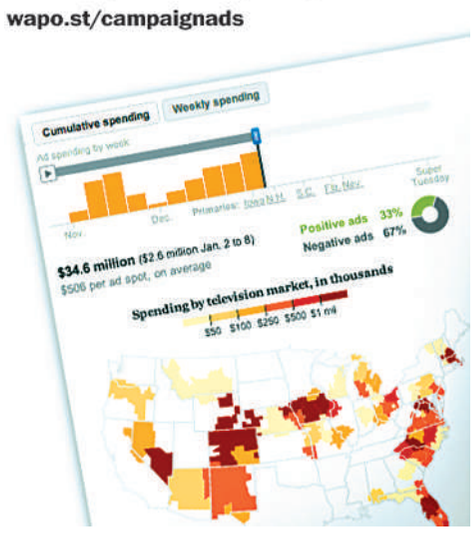
Chris Maloney, Ohio communications director for the Romney campaign, said the visit by Ryan had been intended to highlight the work of the soup kitchen volunteers.

"Our campaign and Congressman Ryan were pleased to bring attention to the meaningful charitable contributions the St. Vincent De Paul Society makes to people in need," Maloney said.

— Felicia Sonmez

washingtonpost.com

Campaign ad spending

Watch the latest campaign ads from the presidential race and track ad spending during the primaries and the general election with Mad Money, the TV ad spending tracker:

wapo.st/campaignads